

The Recommissioning of God's People

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Please open your Bibles to the 11th chapter of Nehemiah. Nehemiah 11. The title of the message this morning is "The Recommissioning of God's People." The recommissioning of God's people, resuming our exposition of the books of Ezra/Nehemiah that we've been looking at now for actually almost two years, approximately two years. It's hard to believe we've been there that long but we have.

It was a nice blessing last Sunday to have Ted Tripp here, wasn't it? I know my family, we've been saying this week, a number of times this phrase has been said in the morning, "It's always Leah." We've been helping to encourage each other to put our hope where it needs to be, not in the things of this world. Anyway, if you didn't hear that message, you would want to watch it and what a blessing it was and also we're working on how to make the rest of the seminar available to you too, so be looking for that as well.

So this morning, the recommissioning of God's people, Nehemiah 11, and what is happening here in the book of Nehemiah, remember, is we're looking at what happened to God's people in the 5th century BC, the events described in this chapter are happening in 445 BC and they represent the culmination of a process that's been going on for more than 90 years because the books of Ezra/Nehemiah, remember, are about the return of the exiles, the nation of Judah, the southern kingdom of God's people had been exiled to Babylon, then under Persian rule they'd been separated from the land. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The people were taken captive. For 70 years they lived in exile and then in the books of Ezra/Nehemiah, what we have is this recounting of the process of the people of God going from being exiled, separated from the true worship of God, temple in ruins, to coming back to the land, being replanted in the land, rebuilding the temple, remember there are three returns, there are three sub-returns in the great return from exile. The first return happens in 538 BC under Zerubbabel and the focus of that is to rebuild the temple, the first six chapters of Ezra about rebuilding the temple, worship being restored. The second return happens in 458 BC, 80 years later under Ezra, and the focus of that return is to restore the law of God to the center of the people of God. So Ezra, that is his calling and we read about that in chapters 7 to 12 of Ezra, 7 to 10, there's only 10 chapters of Ezra, 7 to 10 of Ezra. And then the third return is under Nehemiah in 445 BC, 13 years later than that, and that their focus is to rebuild the walls.

So the people have to come back to the land, rebuild the temple, the law has got to be restored, and then the walls have to be built, and then what we are going to come to today in chapter 11 is kind of the capstone on this process, the final finishing of the process which is the repopulation of Jerusalem. If the people of God are going to be planted in the land as they had been formerly, a worshipping community being all that God has called them to be, Jerusalem must be repopulated and that's what this 11th chapter is about, the repopulation of Jerusalem. And then there's this other interesting thing as we read the text in a moment you're going to see, the first 19 verses are about, well, really the first 24 verses about repopulating Jerusalem, and then from verse 25 to verse 36, the last 12 verses are about reclaiming the land in a sense. We're talking about Jerusalem and all the people that are in Jerusalem and then we're talking about the land and you're going to hear there's all kinds of person's names, which I always love that when I get to pronounce all these names when I'm reading the Bible, and then there are all these place names. It's quite a number of personal names and place names, in fact, there's 72 person's names and there are 32 place names. So over 100 in all, names, names, names, names, names, people who, who, who, places where, where, where. What's going on with that? Why all this detail? What do you care about that? What did the original audience, what did it mean to them? What we're going to see is that there's a sense in which this chapter in describing in great detail the people who were chosen by lot, that is, by rolling the dice, in a sense, to leave their ancestral lands and to live in Jerusalem are honored by God by having their names recorded. And then we learn, though, that the people that didn't come to Jerusalem to live in Jerusalem were also carrying on the work by living out in the land for the people of God and this functions as a recommissioning of God's people and we're going to see that it's basically about recommissioning, it's about being reminded of what you're here to do, what you're here to be.

This is very important. It was very important for these people at this time because their circumstances in life were very difficult. They were living in the land as slaves. Remember that's the terminology they used. It's not they weren't really experiencing slavery that we would be familiar with from American history and the ugliness of American slavery, but they're using it figuratively in this particular passage. We saw this when we read in chapter 9 their prayer of repentance and confession. They ended up in verse 36 saying "we are slaves" twice, "We are slaves in the land." And they go on to say, "What we have belongs to the kings over us." So they know we're back in the land but we're still under Persian hegemony, we're under Persian rule. They're under a sense of an oppressive government. They're free worshipers of God under an oppressive government. Their lives are hard. They're struggling. They're discouraged. Things aren't what they expected when they came back to Jerusalem.

God's ways are not our ways and they're coming face-to-face with that reality and they're tempted to, in their discouragement about their external circumstances, to forget who they are and why they're here. Sound familiar? They live in a hostile environment. Remember, the people when they were rebuilding the wall, when we were reading through those chapters, the first six chapters, remember they had to build the wall with, in a sense, with one hand with a tool and one hand with a weapon because the people around them were conspiring against them to come and to kill them all and to stop the work because there is

a spiritual war going on at all times throughout history. Those who love God are hated by those who hate God.

So they were experiencing this sense of real trouble, real affliction, and this chapter is in the providence of God recommissioning them. The original audience of this chapter are the people right after these events. Most scholars believe Ezra wrote this and so he's put together this account; most of it is his writing with Nehemiah's journal entries placed in there because, remember, there was a lot of first person. When Nehemiah's talking about, "I went out. I inspected the walls," so he's taken that journal entry and he's placed it and God in his providence and in the power of the Lord has put this together as the inerrant inspired word of God like all of Scripture, but it gives us an account of the people of God. And very close to the events, they heard these words differently than you and I. When they heard these names, they sounded familiar. They didn't sound like they do for us. They would even know some of the families. It's hard for me to think of how to explain that but it would be something like, you know, if you're talking among church members and you talk about some saints that have gone on to be with the Lord and newer people don't know them but many of the people that have been here, "Oh yeah, remember." Like in our church years ago, Mildred McAdams. Somebody was talking about George McAdams the other day but George and Mildred McAdams were wonderful saints who loved the Lord, both of them passed away in the early 2000s. Mildred passed first and then George about 7 or 8 years later. George was the one who when I came to pastor here, he and Mildred asked us to go out to dinner, Patti, and I to go out to dinner, and we went to dinner with them and he was a funny guy, but he was one of those dry humor guys. He never laughed at his own jokes, he just said things that were incredibly funny, like a Bob Newhart sort of thing. But anyway, he says to me, "Ty, how long have y'all been married?" And we'd been married at that time like seven years and so I said, "Seven years." And he said, "You know, Mildred and I have been married however many years they had been married at that time," and he said, "and when we got married, we laid down the ground rules upfront. Mildred said, 'Hey, honey, you know, you're the head so every small decision I'll make and every big decision you make.'" And he said, "I've been married, you know, 52 years. I haven't had a big decision come up yet but I'm ready when it does."

But anyway, George and Mildred McAdams. So I say that and that's the kind of thing these names have. They're hearing them like that. In the place names, they can see the geography as it's being said. It would be like and what we're going to see is, they're talking about the repopulation of Jerusalem itself and then Judea or Judah, now a province of Persia, a small part of what it was formerly as a country. It's now a province and what we're going to see, though, is the people have actually moved out beyond the province and are living out in the other areas that aren't Judah, and what the author is wanting the people to see is these are people of faith who are, in a sense, trying to reclaim their ancestral lands by not limiting themselves to the boundaries. They're going outside of what they would know. When they hear these names, they know, "Oh yeah, that's in Judah. That's in our land. They're over here in the land of Ashdod. Or they're over here in the land of the Idumeans." But they're in lands that were formerly Jewish land.

Now how are they doing that? Well, they're going down and they're buying it. It's not like they show up and say, "Hey, this is my land. Thanks for holding it for me." No, they have to buy it, but what's happening is the people of God are recovering their identity as people who are committed to worship and they're recovering their identity as people who are committed to living in the land, reclaiming the land, living as worshipers in the midst even now of unbelievers. And there's a sense in which that summarizes the commission of God's people. You and I are called to live as worshipers, that's why we exist, and we're called to live as worshipers in the midst of an ungodly people, and even as the world is decaying and we feel oppressed by the ungodliness around us, we feel discouraged, this is not time to focus on a "woe is me" mentality. This is a time to remember and reclaim your identity and resume your mission. That's what this passage is about and these names would have had that effect on the people.

So as I read it, think about that. Nehemiah 11, the recommissioning of God's people. Now let me say one more word now about this. Remember in the big picture of Nehemiah, chapters 8 and 9 you had revival, the movement of God upon his people, revival that brought repentance, the return of the life of God of the people of God, chapters 8 and 9. In chapter 10, you have as the outflow of that revival and repentance, the renewal of the covenant. Chapter 10 is the renewal of the covenant, the renewal of the fact that we are your people. But chapter 11 is now recommissioning. "Okay, you understand you're My people, now understand this more deeply, understand what you've committed to." And chapter 11 is the recommissioning of God's people and we're going to see there's two points: recover their identity and resume the mission.

Okay, so now we're looking at the recommissioning of God's people. They've experienced revival, they've experienced the repentance, and they've experienced the recommitment, the renewal of the covenant. Chapter 11, verse 1,

1 Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities. 2 And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. 3 Now these are the heads of the provinces who lived in Jerusalem, but in the cities of Judah each lived on his own property in their cities-the Israelites, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon's servants. 4 Some of the sons of Judah and some of the sons of Benjamin lived in Jerusalem. From the sons of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uzziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez; 5 and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite. 6 All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 able men. 7 Now these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah; 8 and after him Gabbai and Sallai, 928. 9 Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer, and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second in

command of the city. 10 From the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin, 11 Seraiah the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, the leader of the house of God, 12 and their kinsmen who performed the work of the temple, 822; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah, 13 and his kinsmen, heads of fathers' households, 242; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer, 14 and their brothers, valiant warriors, 128. And their overseer was Zabdiel, the son of Haggadolim. 15 Now from the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni; 16 and Shabbethai and Jozabad, from the leaders of the Levites, who were in charge of the outside work of the house of God; 17 and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, who was the leader in beginning the thanksgiving at prayer, and Bakbukiah, the second among his brethren; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun. 18 All the Levites in the holy city were 284. 19 Also the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon and their brethren who kept watch at the gates, were 172. 20 The rest of Israel, of the priests and of the Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, each on his own inheritance. 21 But the temple servants were living in Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of the temple servants. 22 Now the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, from the sons of Asaph, who were the singers for the service of the house of God. 23 For there was a commandment from the king concerning them and a firm regulation for the song leaders day by day. 24 Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, was the king's representative in all matters concerning the people.

Now we go to where outside of Jerusalem they lived.

25 Now as for the villages with their fields, some of the sons of Judah lived in Kiriath-arba and its towns, in Dibon and its towns, and in Jekabzeel and its villages, 26 and in Jeshua, in Moladah and Beth-pelet, 27 and in Hazar-shual, in Beersheba and its towns, 28 and in Ziklag, in Meconah and in its towns, 29 and in En-rimmon, in Zorah and in Jarmuth, 30 Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its towns. So they encamped from Beersheba as far as the valley of Hinnom. 31 The sons of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward, at Michmash and Aija, at Bethel and its towns, 32 at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, 33 Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, 34 Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, 35 Lod and Ono, the valley of craftsmen. 36 From the Levites, some divisions in Judah belonged to Benjamin.

All these names, place names, person's names. Remember, the word of God, I mean, when God inspired his word paper was at a premium. It was costly, so why all the detail?

Couldn't we just say... because other places, in fact, we could have saved verses 25 to 36 because we're already told twice in the books of Ezra/Nehemiah that the people lived in all of their cities. Wasn't that enough? Couldn't we just say all of their cities? It would have been a lot easier, saved a lot of space. No, but they said all of those different cities, all of these cities in Judah, all of these cities in Benjamin, and the people hearing them could see it, and as they could see it, they were impressed by the fact, this was the effect, "Wow, I didn't know we had so many people living there. I didn't know we had people living there. I didn't know we had people living there." it's kind of like when you hear about a good church somewhere. "Hey, there's a really solid Reformed Baptist church in..." And you're like, "Really? In New York City? You've got to be kidding me." You know, I heard the other day the largest Reformed Baptist church in the world is in the Dominican Republic. There's a great church in Costa Rica that some of our own folks went to. Art and Theo Amrich. Fantastic Reformed Baptist church, the only one in Costa Rica.

So what would be happening is they'd be hearing. It's kind of like more like this. Okay, for us it would be something like this. I want to talk about where people are living and serving God faithfully. There's a good church in Athens. There's a good church in Covington, in Connors. There's a really good church in Americus. There's a great church in Macon. There's a fantastic church in Savannah. There's some really good churches. Hey, do you know there's one in Woodstock? There's one in Douglasville. This is the kind of thing and they would be seeing that. Those of you who have any kind of...now you young people, you don't know where anything is because you only follow your phone to get there. This is really a weakness. I'm telling you, it messes with your mind. We need to look at maps. We need to not use our phones all the time. I'm trying to discipline myself to do that because if you use your phone to go somewhere, you can't go back there again without your phone again. Anyway, I digress. The point is when they hear these names, these places, that's the effect, like, "Wow, there's people there. There's people there serving God. There's people serving God in this place, you're kidding me? There's a good church in Buckhead? You've got to be kidding." That's the effect and it's calling them to remember, be where God plants you for his glory.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer and ask his blessing on the rest of our time in his word.

Father, we come just acknowledging our great need of grace. Lord, the complexity of our lives, the challenges that we face, circumstances as we look at the broader culture can be so discouraging and, Father, as we look at our own individual lives, our families, our work situations, our school, our family dynamics, spiritual well-being of those that we love, we can be overwhelmed by discouragement, we could be made ineffective for Your kingdom because we're not walking with a sense of appropriate mission and identity. Lord, speak to us through Your word. Lift our eyes to see our Savior, to live in union with Him and to be all that He has called us to be. We pray this in His name. Amen.

Recommissioning of God's people. Nehemiah 11. So there's two points I want to look at this morning that help us explain what's going on here, the effect of this passage. What was the authorial intention of this passage when God inspired Ezra or whoever was the

author of this particular book, Ezra/Nehemiah, why was this detail included? And it was included to recommission God's people by helping them to see two things.

First of all, there is a call to recover their identity or to recover our identity. This passage calls us to recover our identity. Identity is knowing who you are, right? Identity theft is an amazing reality that's happened in recent generations with the computer age, isn't it? You can have your identity stolen. That's a difficult thing to work through. You've got a lot of issues you have to deal with in that situation but we can have our identity stolen because we just let it slip away. We let discouragement cause us to forget who we are, what our birthright is, whose we are. That's the focus of this first 24 verses. All those names. There are actually 21 people are referred to, you know, all the "son of, son of, son of," is identifying this one guy at the beginning of the list with great specificity. "I'm talking about, you know, the Jim whose dad was Bill, whose dad was whatever, whose dad was whatever."

And we're told the number of them and we're told, I said there's 21 names between verses 4 and 19 and they're names of people from the tribe of Judah and they're names from the people from the tribe of Benjamin, and they're names from the priests, and there's names from the Levites, and there's names from the temple servants, and you add them all up and there's 3,000, the numbers. There are 21 names but then you're told how many associated with them of which they are the leaders, and there's 3,044 men who were in Jerusalem, that is, so them and their families, so probably 15-30,000 people are chosen by lot to move back into Jerusalem, a significant investment of human capital back into the city.

Now I mentioned Judah and Benjamin, let me just explain something because this stuff is confusing. When you're reading the Bible and this is why it's good to have a good study Bible and some tools to help you understand why just the tribe of Judah and Benjamin. Weren't there 12 tribes? Yeah, there were, and then when you add Levi, there's really 13. Levi was one of the original 12 but he's replaced by the half-tribes of Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh. What happened is when the unified kingdom of Israel split after the death of Solomon, 10 tribes went with Jeroboam, you can find this in 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 11. Two tribes stayed with David or David's family, David's descendants, Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Two tribes stayed there, Judah, the tribe of David, and Benjamin, and also the Levites came down south. They were kicked out by the northerners. When Jeroboam wanted to start his own worship deal and he franchised the temple which God hated, just read 1 Kings 12-13, read the rest of the book of Kings. God hated what Jeroboam did. What did he do? He decided to invent his own place of worship, his own priesthood. All these things about worshiping God he made up in his own heart and God hated that. Read those books and see it. Worship is not up to us. God tells us how we approach him. He tells us where we approach him. Jerusalem was the only place you could worship God at that point in history. There was only one place. God hated the high places that they used to offer incense on or sacrifices on. I mean, think about it, if they had to go all the way to the temple every time they had to offer sacrifice, that was quite a commitment, wasn't it?

One place. It made sense. I mean, common sense, let's franchise this. Let's put some priests out there and let them offer sacrifices on the high places. That's what they did but you read Kings, God hated that because he was teaching something very profound. "First of all, you don't determine how you come to Me. I, God, sovereignly determine how all of us come to Him." You come on God's terms or you don't come.

But he was also teaching something wonderful beyond that, there is one place where men meet God. Only one. No other. He was teaching us there is only one name given among men by which you must be saved, the name of Jesus. Jesus, John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Literally in the Greek, "tabernacled among us." He's saying that Jesus is the tent of meeting and Jesus in chapter 2 of John's gospel, the very next chapter, John reminds us that Jesus at the temple said to the religious leaders, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it." They totally misunderstood him and John says he was talking about the temple of his body. You see, the temple was fulfilled in Christ and there is no other. It doesn't matter how you feel. It doesn't matter how sincere you are. It doesn't matter how emotionally involved and invested you are. If you're seeking God anywhere other than the one place he has said, it is all for naught and, in fact, it's actually an expression even though you may feel sincere and feel humble, according to God it's actually an expression of incredible audacious pride for you to think you can go however you want to go. Humility submits to God and this is what he's teaching very painfully and clearly throughout the Old Testament. There's one way to meet God. One place, the man Christ Jesus.

So the people are realizing at this point in history, this is before Jesus has come, 445 years before Christ will be born approximately 445 years, they are reclaiming their identity as the Old Testament people of God and they are to build their lives around worship in Jerusalem. The worship in Jerusalem must be protected. They're chosen by lot, verse 1, one tenth. It's like a tithe of the people are sent to Jerusalem. A tenth. It was the lot, every tenth person had to go to Jerusalem, and then they blessed the ones who went. So they were leaving the land, they would prefer to be on their ancestral land but they can't. They'd been chosen to go to Jerusalem so it's going to require sacrifice but it must be done because, what? The people of God are first and foremost a worshipping community. They are people that have been brought out of darkness into God's light to worship him.

The need for repopulating the city, you go back to the chapter before revival broke out in chapter 8, if you turn back to Nehemiah 7. That's why when you read your Bible, you've just got to think. I mean, you've got to pray, ask the Lord to give you insight. You've got to have spiritual help but you also have to work hard and think. You don't just read over these names and think, "Oh my goodness, I'm glad that's over." I mean, I always feel a little bit of that when I get done with that list honestly, especially when I'm doing it publicly. You see, it's much easier to read silently. You read correctly when you read silently, don't you? No, but it's not just that, okay, what's this here for?

Now why is it here? Well, you go back to Nehemiah 7. The wall has been finished, just finished the end of chapter 6. Chapter 7, verse 1, "Now when the wall was rebuilt and I

had set up the doors," now we're back in Nehemiah's journal, you see, first person, he's speaking, Nehemiah. "Now when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed, then I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many." Why does he have to have these guys in charge of Jerusalem? Because the enemies may attack and mess things up. They may come in and kill people, try to tear down the temple so they've got to have guards.

Look what he says in verse 3, "Then I said to them, 'Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot, and while they are standing guard, let them shut and bolt the doors.'" Every morning and every night you've got to be rigid about this. Open them when it's fully daytime. There can't be a secret ambush going on. The people are all awake and ready. And shut them and bolt them at night. "Appoint guards," verse 3, "from the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his post, and each in front of his own house." Verse 4, "Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built." That's the problem, there's nobody there. They've got to repopulate the city. The city can't be maintained unless there are people in it and what that means is, why is the city so important? Because worship is so important. The temple is in the heart of the city. The one place that God can be sought is in the heart of the city. There must be sacrifices made to make sure that worship is protected and is practiced.

I mentioned this is the final step in this extensive process. Remember they are brought back from exile, they build the temple, they reestablish the law, they rebuild the walls but if they don't repopulate the city, it's all for nothing. This must happen. If they don't repopulate the city, worship will be halted again and again there will be no sacrifices, no opportunity for men to deal with their sins, to come back to God. No atonement. No regular offering, no regular morning and evening offering. No regular new moon offering. No regular festivals and feasts. No singing. No worship. Everything hinges on this.

So the people have to make the sacrifice because they have to understand, "Why are we here? Who are we? We belong to God. We have been bought with a price." We're not here to have a pleasant life and choose our own way. I mean, the Lord is good and he likes us to enjoy things. He says, "When you eat, bless it and rejoice in God's goodness. As you eat give glory to God. Enjoy the good things of life." Yes, but that's not the main purpose. You're not here to do those things, you're here ultimately to enjoy God and that when you put God at the center, then everything else is an enjoyment of him. If we can learn, this is what we're supposed to learn as Christians, we're supposed to learn to even as we eat and drink to do all for the glory of God. Even as you eat a delicious meal, you do it for the glory of God. You praise him as you're eating for the deliciousness of food. He invented food. He invented the idea. He could have just made us like gas, you know, gas run automobiles. "I'm hungry. Fill me up." Gas smells terrible. You think of cars, think, "Boy, that's some good gasoline coming in right there, I'm telling you." No, but he made us with, you know, 10,000 taste buds. He made food with this incredible diversity of spices and flavors. This is God. God made this for us to enjoy but not to enjoy apart from him, to enjoy from him. The gift is better when it's received from the giver with an

eye on the giver. So we receive it and we worship. That's what we're called to do. That's what we were created to do. We are created to worship. Every human being was created for worship. That's what you're wired to do.

Dr. Tripp shared an interesting analogy at one of the nights we were in the conference. I think it was Friday night he said, or Saturday morning actually, We were created for worship, the last session if you watch it, and we have to remember we were created for worship and that's what our children are created to do and they're going to worship something. If they don't worship God, they will worship something. Romans 1:18-25, if you don't praise God and give him glory, you will turn and worship the creature rather than the Creator. You will worship, you know, animals. You will worship pleasure. You will worship your career. You will worship love or sexuality. You will worship something if you don't worship God. You can't do anything but worship.

He talks about, he said think how different we are than the animals. He says, you know, we have competitions where people like, you know, a gymnast performs a routine and all these judges and all these people fill an arena to watch and clap as they do it, and then the judge says 9.9. He says you don't see, you know, grizzly bears out in the river in Alaska and they're on the side watching as Big Brown, you know, reaches in and grabs a salmon out of the water with her claw. I mean, that's an impressive feat but they're not saying, "Yea! Good work!" He said they don't have, you know, like little bears have posters of Big Brown on their wall at home. No, it's people that do that. People recognize greatness and applaud it and that's a reflection of the fact that we are made to worship. There's an appropriate appreciation of human greatness. There's an appropriate appreciation of the 9.9 or the 10.0 on the vault. Absolutely. It's appropriate and if you can see that as a Christian and worshiping God who made people like this, then it's even sanctified and holy.

But the world is not like that but you're made to worship so understand that. That's your identity. That's who we are. When God called the people out of Egypt, the first thing he did when he brought them to Mount Sinai was he told them, and you can look this up in Exodus 19:3-6, he said, "Say to the people that I brought you up from the land of Egypt to make you My own. You're to be for Me a kingdom of priests." A kingdom of priests. Now there are priests within this kingdom that we talked about here but he says in the truest sense, "They perform a function but in reality I want you to see, all of you to see yourselves as priests." What are priests? Priests are people who are devoted to worship. They are devoted to God and they bring people to God. That's what we're supposed to do. That's who we are. We are to be worshipers, created for worship.

Nothing satisfies like God, whatever you think will satisfy. That was the whole point of, "In the morning it was Leah." You put your hope in something, you think something is going to satisfy like Jacob did when he thought Rachel would make him happy but in the morning, behold it was Leah. It's always that. Even when he had Rachel, in the truest sense at some point he realized that even Rachel, behold it was Leah. She wasn't what I expected. She wasn't able to satisfy my heart. She wasn't able to be all that I needed her

to be because God didn't make any human being to be that for you. He made Jesus Christ the Son of God to be that for you, and only him.

So we're to build our lives around worship. We are to see we are not our career, we are not our educational pedigree, we are not our ethnic identity or our geographical location, the place we come from. That's not our defining characteristic. The defining characteristic of every human being should be this, was created to be this but for the Christian is absolutely this, you are, the defining characteristic about you is you are a worshiper of Jesus Christ if you are a Christian. That's who you are. Everything else way secondary. Not unimportant. All those things have a place in our lives but if you don't get the first thing right, the rest of it is just worthless and the first thing must be first to be a worshiper. This means that we see ourselves as we're set apart to be people who are worshipping God. We're to give ourselves to the worship of God.

One of the ways we do that, what are the ways that we do that? Well, one of the things that we're called to do in the economy of God, New Testament makes clear is we're called to gather to worship on the Lord's Day. We're called to set aside this day unto the Lord and to get together with God's people as his... I mean, we are the Jerusalem. When you look at the New Testament, read Hebrews 12, Galatians 4, you find in both those passages the fact that the church is now the true Jerusalem. Revelation 21. Jerusalem was a type of the church and for them to invest in Jerusalem, to live in Jerusalem is for you and me to invest in the people of God in the church in the worshiping community. Not in just to know each other and to be friendly. No, it's to make other people worship more effectively and to help me worship more effectively. You see that fellowship is really about that. It's not about just, I mean, we enjoy each other and we don't have to always be talking about spiritual things. No, there's a place but if our basic function is worship, then everything, even the mundane things, even the weather, even how the Braves are doing, even whatever is caught up into a higher nobler reality. We're called to worship and so we're to get together to worship and are you making that the priority in your life? Are your children seeing it? If you're going to disciple your children, you know they're going to worship and you want to model for them this is what we do. We are worshipers of Jesus Christ first and foremost.

There are a lot of ways that we're tempted to put that into second place. You know, there's pressures always and there are challenges we have to work with and some things aren't so easy, but one of the things that we need to do as parents is think about what are we communicating by the activities that we're involved in and particularly if those activities are on Sunday, what are you communicating but what really matters in life? You may say that we're worshipers but your life is saying something different. We're worshipers when it's convenient. We're worshipers when there's not something better to do. We're worshipers when we feel like, "We have time for that now." No. The call of those who belong to Christ, if you have come to know Jesus and you understand what he's done for you, this is what he came to make us worshipers. Our faith is not something we add on.

Sunday morning Bible study today, Todd was teaching about Mark 1 and what it means to be a disciple and this is a helpful illustration. For a disciple to become a disciple and in Mark 1 you have Jesus calling the disciples to himself and he calls them and they're like, he's just walking down by the shoreline at the Sea of Galilee and he calls out to the boat to Andrew and Simon Peter and says, "Come, follow Me. I'll make you fishers of men." And they leave their nets and what they're doing and they follow him. He goes a little farther and he comes to John and James who are with their dad Zebedee in the boat and he says, "Come, follow me and I'll make you fishers of men." They leave what's behind and they follow him and the point was to be a disciple means there is a sense in which you break off every other allegiance and this one allegiance is what defines you.

Is that true in your life? Are you living like that? If you're not, you need to examine yourself. You need to go to Christ. You need to repent and ask him for grace to help you repent and to put Christ where he needs to be, and you need to put feet on that by starting to do things like be in church regularly, to be under the word regularly, to be meeting with other brothers and sisters regularly. Some of you are at home because of your concerns about health and I'm not saying that you cannot be. Some of you need to be home and you need to be protecting yourself, but there are some of you who don't need to be and you're letting fear keep you from being what you are created to be. I can't tell you whether that's true for each individual but you need to examine yourself before the Lord. Are you living as a worshiper? Is that who you are?

They needed to recover their identity. Jerusalem, the worship needed to be at the center. Secondly, they needed to resume their mission. This really comes out in the where that's focused in verses 25 to 36. In verses 25 to 30, you have the restoration of Judah's people to their land, so to speak. I mentioned there were two tribes that stayed with the Davidic line. Judah, his tribe, and Benjamin. Benjamin was the tribe in which Jerusalem originally was in and it was the area, it's kind of a smaller area right around Jerusalem and northwest and east of Jerusalem. And Judah was almost up to Jerusalem and then south, southwest, south, southeast. And as you read these lists, I mean, like I said, it's hard because, you know, we don't know... Have you ever been to Nob or Ananiah? There's a great barbecue place in Hadid. No, but anyway, seriously so we don't know these names but when you look at them, what's happening is there's a sense in which there is a geographical picture forming in the minds of those who are hearing it. In verses 25 to 30, Kiriath-arba is a land just outside of the border of the Judea that is now a province in Persia that Nehemiah is over.

These people lived just outside of it so there are some folks from the tribe of Judah that are living there. He goes on and says Dibon, Jekabzeel, which is one of the farthest reaches of where Judah was before as a country when it was his own country, way out of this postage stamp that is now Judea or Judah now. Jeshua, Moladah, Beth-pelet, Hazar-shual, Beersheba. Beersheba is way to the south. In fact, it's such an important name it's repeated twice. You see it in verse 27, "Hazar-shual, in Beersheba and its towns." Then in verse 30 after he finishes, "Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish, and its fields, Azekah and its towns. So they encamped from Beersheba as far as the valley of Hinnom." He brings up Beersheba again. Beersheba was one of the towns that when you read

through the Old Testament, you will hear a phrase like this, "David was made king. All the people followed him from Dan to Beersheba." When Samuel was prophet, he was acknowledged as a prophet from all the people from Dan to Beersheba. Dan is in the way north. It was so far north it wasn't even in Israel most of the time. It was way up in Syria almost. But during the Promised Land in the time of Solomon and David, it was a part of Israel. Israel the northern kingdom, Judah the southern kingdom. Dan is way up here, Beersheba is way down here. Do you see that?

Now what happens then is the northern kingdom, those 10 tribes, they're gone, taken away by the Assyrians. Now Judah is the southern kingdom. They're taken captive by the Babylonians, the southern kingdom. When they come back, their borders before had been Beersheba to Geba. In fact, there's a verse in 2 Kings 23 where it talks about the revival under Josiah and he starts tearing down high places and restoring worship, and it says he tore down high places from Beersheba to Geba. Look with me at verse 30, "So they encamped from Beersheba as far as the valley of Hinnom." Verse 31, "The sons of Benjamin also lived from Geba." So Geba is the northeastern-most point of Benjamin. Beersheba is the southwestern-most point of Judah. And he says, "Look," the people reading this are like, "We have people that are from all the way down here to all the way up here. We have reclaimed the land of Judah," as it were. "Now in a typological way because we really don't have possession of it. We're not our own nation but we have people who are spread out, who are living as priests of God all over the former land of Judah."

This had to be a great encouragement to them. This is like, "Wow, this is so awesome! Really?" Back to what I said earlier, "There's a really good church in the Dominican Republic. There's a really good church in Canton. There's a really good church in Carrollton. There's a really good church." Yes, there are. And so the Lord is not, in this passage he's showing us here, he's not saying the only people who mattered were the people who lived in Jerusalem. No, they had to go. He's saying that these people are also every bit as important and they're living out among the Gentiles.

And it's interesting, there's a key word here. Verse 30, "So they encamped from Beersheba as far as the valley of Hinnom." Commentators talk about this word, it's a word that's out of place, in a sense, because the word "lived" is said over and over and over. "They lived here. They lived here. They lived here." Seven times in the chapter it says "lived." Here it says "encamped." It's a term that is almost a technical term that's used in the books of Numbers particularly. It's said 143 times in the Bible, 143 times this word "camped, encamped," 74 of them are in Numbers. Over half of all the uses in the whole Bible are in Numbers. It's talking about the tent of meeting and when the tent of meeting would camp, would pitch its tent, would stop, they would pitch the tent of meeting and that's the Lord camping and the people camped around the tent of meeting. So scholars say look at this, what the author is doing here by using this word is using a buzzword that would have clicked in the minds of those familiar with their Old Testament. They heard this word and they immediately thought Numbers, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua. This is a word that was used to speak of the encampment of the people around the worship of God and also it had military overtones, like they would encamp

before they took Ai, for instance. They stop and they camped there. They pitched their tents there but they're doing that because they're about to take some territory.

So this idea is, listen, the worship is restored in Jerusalem and the people of God have spread out around the center of worship and they're making impact all around them. They're encamping. In fact, I think this is really key because in the book of Nehemiah we've already seen this emphasis on, remember the one feast that is really highlighted in the books of Ezra/Nehemiah, the Feast of Booths that they celebrated in the revival in chapter 8? The Feast of Booths celebrated the time when the people of God wandered in the wilderness wanderings and they were camping. That's what Numbers is about, the whole book is about it. They're camping around the tent of meeting. They surround the tent of meeting, the tent of meeting in the center with God's glory there. The people of God encamping around, lives centered on worship, moving from place to place, taking more territory. So he's saying, "Listen, to all of you who are discouraged," he's saying this to the people that are reading this book, say around 400 BC. Ezra died, Nehemiah is gone. What are we going to do? We're still under Persian dominion. Keep worship at the center and keep going out among the people and taking land, not by actually taking land. Go out among the people and live as true worshipers of Jesus in their presence. Don't hide your worship of Christ. You go out into all the highways and the byways and all the places where ungodliness is happening. I mean, there's a wisdom about this but basically saying don't retreat from the world.

This is an amazing passage that's teaching that. The Jews wanted to cloister away, to be monks, and we can be tempted to do the same thing. He's saying, "Listen, you get together regularly to worship, put worship at the center. Be with the people of God regularly. Make that a commitment so that you can go out and you can then live as worshipers of Christ in a dark world and light up the world for Jesus." That's what he's calling them to do. Don't be discouraged by the outward circumstances. You look at it and you say, "We're slaves in the land. We don't have any, this land really doesn't belong to us." I mean, they probably were buying little pieces of land and they know their great grandfather owned 200 acres and here they are with this one little half acre plot. But in doing that they're showing the faith that, "This is what God has called us to, our ancestral inheritance." And in doing that, they're living among unbelievers as people who are faithful to God.

That's what you and I are called to do. In a dark world you're called to let your light shine. Matthew 5:16, "You are the light of the world." But men do not light a lamp and put it under a peck measure. They light a lamp and they put it on a lampstand and it gives light to all in the house. That's what he says in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men." Let your light shine. The love of Christ, the worship of Christ, the knowledge of God that you have, if you are a Christian, if you have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, be a worshiper, a delighted worshiper of God. Let that shine. Don't hide it. And how do they see it? "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father." That is, you're doing good works. You're doing active kindnesses to other people but you're doing it out of a desire to worship him.

You're not doing it to please people, to win friends. You're not doing it for any other reason than to lift up Christ and when that happens, the light is shining.

You think about how easy it is to forget that, how often we find ourselves doing everything but that. How do we recover our identity? How do we resume our mission? Well, we believe what God says about who we are. We believe what God says about what we're called to do, we're called to make disciples, yes. We're called to be in the world but not of the world. But essentially it comes with union with Christ. When I realize I'm not worshiping like I need to, I'm not living joyfully in the midst of a sad world, I need Jesus. As a Christian, I mean, you're an unbeliever, you need Jesus today because if you don't have Jesus, you are going to end up separated from God forever. If you don't have Jesus, that is your certain destination. You must repent and believe the gospel. But Jesus is a Savior of all who come to him. Go to him as you are now. He will receive you. You don't clean yourself up to go to him. You don't repent before you go to him. You don't make yourself born again before you go to him. You go to Jesus, he will give you new birth, he will grant you repentance but go to him. That's salvation. You don't work it up in yourself. Then after you're a Christian, it's the same way. As you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him. You received him by grace alone, how do you walk by grace alone? You see that I'm not living for him, I'm not loving him, I'm not worshiping him, what do you do? Go to Jesus and say, "Lord Jesus, my heart is cold, my heart is distracted. I'm disheartened. I need You. Live Your life in me." And you look at Christ and you get in his word. You don't just pray, you read the Bible and you look at Jesus, you meet him in his word. This is where you find Jesus, in the Bible. The written word reveals the living word. Jesus said that. "How can you be masters of the Bible? You know the Bible and you don't know anything about Me," he says to the Pharisees. The Bible is all about Christ.

You go to him and you say, "Lord Jesus, I'm failing to be what I've been called to be. Show me what I need to do and then empower me to do it. I don't have the power to change my heart. I don't have the power to fan the flames of my heart to love You, to worship You, but You always lived a perfect life of worship and You can live that in me." And so through union with Christ, trusting and resting in Jesus, we become all that he wants us to be and so when we're distracted, when we're discouraged, to recover your identity, to remember who you are, you're a worshiper, Jesus will make you a worshiper. He came to seek and to make worshipers. He came to seek and make disciples who are like him who go into the world and make disciples.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your word. We thank You for the calling that You have placed upon Your people. Lord, we confess that we so easily get sidetracked, we so easily stop following, we wander, we find ourselves discouraged, disheartened, sometimes despairing. Thank You that You are a shepherd Lord, that You come after Your sheep, and that You've done everything necessary to cleanse us. Thank You for Your blood that washes us white as snow. Thank You for Your grace that changes our hearts. Thank You for Your power that makes us truly love You because we don't love You, we don't work it

up in ourselves, we respond to the reality that You love us even as we are. While we were yet sinners, You died for us so, Lord, enrapture our hearts, make us more diligent followers of You, make us more satisfied, make us more faithful and more diligent to work hard to serve others that they might see our light shining and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. We pray in His name. Amen.